

# Daniel Ellsberg

**'We can end the arms race'**

BY BOB BLANCHARD AND SUSAN WATROUS

**D**aniel Ellsberg began his brilliant U.S. Government career at the very heart of the Establishment. At Harvard he graduated *summa cum laude*, received a Ph.D. in economics, and wrote both his undergraduate and doctoral theses on "Decision-making Under Uncertainty." In 1958, he joined the Rand Corporation, the West Coast think tank, as an analyst of the Pentagon's defense and nuclear strategies.

Ellsberg, called a "genius" by Henry Kissinger, held the highest security clearance granted by the Government. In the 1960s, he served the White House and the State and Defense Departments as a consultant on strategic war plans and the command and control of nuclear weapons. He was one of the authors of the Pentagon Papers, the top-secret study of America's twenty-three-year involvement in Vietnam, and the only researcher with authorized access to the entire forty-three-volume study.

Ellsberg spent two years in Vietnam analyzing the war and the pacification program, occasionally even walking point on infantry patrols in the Mekong Delta. It was during this period that he gradually became disillusioned with what he saw as the destructiveness and futility of the war.

In 1969, while attending a War Resisters International meeting in Pennsylvania, Ellsberg made a decision that would change his life and the course of history: He would make public the contents of the Pentagon Papers. At that meeting, a young American named Randall Kehler (whose home was confiscated this year by the Internal Revenue Service for tax resistance) announced he was on his way to prison for refusing to cooperate with the draft. This affected Ellsberg, he says, "as though an ax had split my head, and my heart broke open. What had really happened was that my life had split in two."

Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers to *The New York Times* catapulted him to international fame and a spot on President Nixon's "enemies list." The Nixon Administration dispatched members of the White House "plumbers" to burglarize the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist in an attempt to obtain damaging information. Ellsberg was indicted on twelve counts of espionage, theft, and conspiracy, for which he faced a possible 115 years in prison. The case was dismissed in 1973 because of the Government's misconduct.

Since then, Ellsberg, now fifty-eight, has labored for peace—lecturing, writing, doing research, and participating in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience which have brought him several

dozen arrests. He has received the Tom Paine Award and the Gandhi Peace Award. Today, as a senior research associate at Harvard University's Center for Psychological Studies in the Nuclear Era, he is working on a study of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and its implications for current NATO and arms-control policies.

"To a striking degree, my research agenda, like my political concerns, remains what it became a quarter-century ago, while I was still in the Government," he says. "My main preoccupation has been to understand and avert the prospect of general war."

We conducted our interviews with Daniel Ellsberg at his home in Kensington, California. At the close of our last session, we asked how he manages to continue his tireless efforts for peace without losing hope. "It's impossible," he laughed. "Of course I get discouraged. But what this is about is preserving life on Earth, and life on Earth is marvelous—a miracle. Every moment we can prolong that is worth anything we do."

**Q:** What's your perspective on the new arms-reduction proposals the Bush Administration advanced at the NATO summit? Are the proposals truly a breakthrough, or is this just another public-relations battle between the superpowers, with George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev jockeying for position?

**Daniel Ellsberg:** I can't think of a time in my adult life when there has been such a clear prospect of a substantive, fundamental shift in global policies away from the Cold War.

Bush has set a process in motion that could carry him much farther than he has imagined. Our Establishment's fear of a split in NATO, the resurgence of the German antinuclear movement, and the downfall of [West German Chancellor Helmut] Kohl—together with the dramatic initiatives and unilateral reductions in Europe that Gorbachev was offering—forced Bush into a negotiation process which he would otherwise have avoided.

Bush was facing an immediate political threat: A collapse of the NATO summit over negotiations on tactical short-range nuclear missiles would have been very embarrassing to him. Thus, the concessions that Bush made to the Soviets at the

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summit were tactical concessions, and what we need now is a public determination to see the negotiation process go forward, to keep the momentum. That puts a particular challenge on the American people, first to recognize the possibilities, and then to recognize our own responsibilities to act—to press Bush in ways that structure his incentives, that box him in.

**Q:** You're saying that Bush's proposals were simply a "quick fix" motivated by the tricky political situation in West Germany?

**Ellsberg:** I think Bush came into office with no intent whatever to change the major premises and themes of Ronald Reagan's policies, let alone of the overall Cold War. In the first several months of the Bush Administration, all indications were that Bush, [Secretary of Defense Richard] Cheney, and [National Security Adviser Brent] Scowcroft were of the opinion that Reagan had been too forthcoming in the last year or two with respect to Gorbachev—too trusting and too willing to change the axioms of U.S. policy. They were determined to be tougher and more skeptical. Bush's aim was to preserve the Cold War framework of international relationships.

Gorbachev was actually ridiculed as being fraudulent—the "drugstore cowboy"—for his unilateral measures, the significance of which was very much downplayed. The Administration was constantly deprecating the possibility that changes of a serious nature were taking place in the Soviet Union. They were refusing to interpret Gorbachev as being what he is—a man seeking really fundamental change. What that means, very bluntly, is that Bush and his advisers would be quite happy to see Gorbachev replaced by a hard-liner, because that would confirm the underpinnings of the Cold War; and that's basically what they want to preserve.

**Q:** The prospect of a denuclearized Europe seems to make the Bush Administration very nervous. Why?

**Ellsberg:** The Cold War is founded on the notion that the Soviet Union is an enemy so rapacious, so reckless, so strong—Hitler-like in its will and in the power of its war machine—that it can be deterred from crossing the border of West Germany only by a high likelihood that it will meet a nuclear response.

This assumption that the Soviet Union must be met by a nuclear minefield or it will take over all of Western Europe, along with the assumption that the Soviet Union is behind all the troubles in the Third World, provides the rationale for the institutions of the Cold War: the arms race, our interventionary forces, the concentration of power in the Executive Branch as opposed to Congress or the courts, the manipulations of the CIA, and U.S. hegemony in NATO.

All of these depend on an image of an enemy that is defined primarily by the necessity to confront it with the threat of nuclear first-use. If we acknowledge, by the negotiated elimination of our tactical missiles in Europe, that we no longer face an enemy that requires the first-use threat, that deflates our adversary to a level that will no longer support any of these other Cold War institutions. I'm saying that the effective, non-bluff, first-use threat represented by our tactical weapons on German soil is not just *coexistent* with the Cold War, it's *essential* to the Cold War.

So if we have an opening—and I think we have—to get into immediate negotiations on these tactical weapons in Europe, to subject them to public discussion and, as a result, to eliminate them, we will have taken an essential step toward ending not just the rhetoric of the Cold War but the panoply of institutions that have come with it.

That applies particularly to the constant buildup and "modernization" of strategic nuclear weapons whose main rationale is to back up our threats of nuclear escalation. So long as that expensive and dangerous race goes on, it needs the imagery of the Cold War to justify it.

**Q:** Aren't you overstating your case when you say that public discussion of tactical nuclear weapons would inevitably lead to their elimination?

**"I can't think of a time when there has been such a prospect of a shift away from the Cold War."**

**Ellsberg:** I don't think so. The question the Bush Administration has been posing is, Do we not want to continue our tactical missile deterrent in Europe? As they say, it's worked so far to prevent conflict.

Let me state my own position: The notion of defending Europe by the threat to initiate nuclear war was the most irresponsible, reckless decision ever undertaken by humans in the history of our species.

Tactical nuclear weapons have a military function that cannot stand much public attention or discussion because it rests on premises that are very dangerous. The real function of those missiles is to establish a nuclear tripwire in Europe—to pose a high probability that at least some nuclear weapons will be launched in the event of a conflict that brings Soviet troops into West Germany.

In every military aspect, the capabilities of these weapons are duplicated by weapons that are not based in Europe, and in terms of target coverage these weapons make no real contribution. It's their vulnerability that makes their use so likely. The very fact that they are on the ground—within reach of the borders—means that they would be subject to Soviet attack and capture in the early hours of any conflict in Europe; the pressure on low-level commanders to *use them or lose them* would be intense.

The U.S. public generally has a mythical—totally illusionary—notion that the President himself has physical control of these weapons by the codes that supposedly he alone controls. But what makes these weapons so very likely to go off is that they would be ultimately controlled by the lower-level field commanders who also control these codes, and who would feel the weight of a combat situation surrounding them.

Moreover, the fact that these weapons only target Germany means they are the most tempting weapons for the President to use in response to a Soviet attack. A President making decisions in Washington might decide to use those weapons in circumstances when the Germans would not want them used. Even though the Germans, as part of NATO, have been threatening for years to use these weapons, they—like everybody else in Europe—want that posture to be essentially a bluff. They cannot want the threat carried out, because that would mean the annihilation of Germany.

But the weapons in Germany are no bluff; they're more like the tripwire to the Doomsday machine. The question I would ask is, Was it ever a responsible decision to create such a nuclear minefield in Europe?

As Kurt Vonnegut's narrator says in *Mother Night*, "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be." For over forty years our leaders have been pretending to be willing to blow up the Northern Hemisphere if various not-impossible things occur. They're pretending to be insane, immoral, and fantastically dangerous. And for the European leaders to lend themselves to this basically American strategy was irresponsible and servile compliance with a dominant power—and essentially unforgivable. It should be unforgivable from the point of view of their own people.

At last we're seeing a Europe that is waking up from the madness of this strategy and questioning it, and I'm certain the questioning will go on—beyond the immediate issue of the number of nuclear weapons in Germany or whether there should be nuclear weapons in Germany—to the policy as a whole. In





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other words, the worst fear of the Bush strategists will be realized—the fear that the whole basis of our policy of the threat of nuclear weapons in Europe is going to be challenged in an articulate and massive way. And with the real prospect that our policy will, at last, be changed.

**Q:** Gorbachev recently made a high-profile visit to West Germany. What's your assessment of the significance of his visit, and of his incredible popularity there?

**Ellsberg:** Since the Germans see themselves as being in the front line for any major European war, they're understandably very enthusiastic about Gorbachev. Furthermore, I believe Gorbachev is a fairly astounding statesman and world leader in terms of his willingness to repudiate the policies not only of his immediate predecessors, but of generations of Soviet leaders—to talk about the faults in their positions and the need for change. We have seen few leaders in history who were so willing to free themselves from an allegiance to past policies. And the measures he's taking are remarkably adapted not only to his own country's needs, but to the world's.

This isn't to say he invented the whole movement by himself. Every Soviet will tell you there are broad desires for such shifts in Soviet society; it's no accident that Gorbachev came to power. But still, the same Soviets will say, without Gorbachev the changes would not come so swiftly and would not be expressed so dramatically.

These new attitudes have a special significance in the case of Germany, because the Soviets appear to be in the extremely important process of overcoming their historically well-justified fear of Germany. Gorbachev is making a bid for a new relationship based on cooperation and economic partnership between countries that have been bitter enemies.

**Q:** The Bush Administration's recent policy statements on East-West relations keep returning to a central point: that we are witnessing the failure of communism and the success of the "containment" policy pursued by the United States for the last forty years. Could you comment?

**Ellsberg:** The Cold War was merely a continuation of our society's organization during World War II—the perpetuation of military spending and a wartime executive with wartime prerogatives and power.

This extension of World War II psychology into an otherwise peaceful era was accompanied by our reversal of alliances: the abandonment of our alliance with the Soviet Union and its replacement with alliances with our previous foes: Germany and Japan. This, in turn, required defining the Soviet Union as having the character of our wartime enemy, as being equivalent to Nazi Germany under Hitler.

Our Cold War policies have been based on a recognition that if the United States is to play a commanding economic and military role in the world, we must have the kind of enemy we faced in World War II: a demonic enemy, bent on world domination, whose very existence legitimizes *anything* we might do. It's that enemy-image on which we've based our strategy of a first-use threat of nuclear weapons—essentially a terrorist threat on a scale that no terror regime has ever been capable of posing. In the late 1940s, the United States encountered a world susceptible to U.S. hegemony. We defined a global "free world sphere" of U.S. influence—where we could determine or veto forms of government and economic policy, by military intervention if necessary, extending up to the borders of the Soviet Union, its satellites, and China.

The only way we could envision controlling such a vast sphere was by assuming that we would, if necessary, threaten to use—or actually use—tactical nuclear weapons in support of our interventionary forces. And we did threaten to use our tactical nuclear weapons a number of times in that way, usually without the knowledge of the American public, usually against nationalist adversaries that lacked nuclear weapons but had some support from the Soviet Union or China.

What I'm saying is that our first-use nuclear threat has not



been just an add-on to our overall global policy; it has been fundamental to our aspirations for global control. And to give up that threat in NATO, both because it's suicidal—as it has been all along—and because it has been deprived of any appearance of legitimacy by the change in the nature of our adversary, could lead, under political pressure, to the abandonment of our covert first-use threats elsewhere in the world as well. That would challenge us to renounce the ambitions for global control we've had since World War II.

**Q:** As a nation, we have always professed a great deal of concern with our international image. How does that self-consciousness affect this nuclear-threat dynamic?

**Ellsberg:** Our leaders often worry that in a crisis they personally may be seen, either at home or abroad, as wimps and liberals who are incapable of being brutal and murderous. Actually, our leaders don't suffer from that reputation all that much in the rest of the world. Presidents tend to ignore the fact that nuclear weapons have been used by this country, and only by this country, on humans. And long before the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we were committing mass murder in Tokyo and other cities in Japan, and before that in Germany—carpet bombing, terror bombing that was aimed at killing as many civilians as possible.

The implications of that are better understood in other countries, particularly those that have been under our bombs, than they are by most Americans. It doesn't take much effort to make it credible that we would kill large numbers of people if they defied us. I worry about the effect in a crisis of the fact that George Bush is defensive about what *Newsweek* once called the "wimp factor." We need to become more aware of the large role machismo plays in our society, and work to change that.

**Q:** Proponents of a "strong national defense" often rely tacitly on the belief that severe cuts in U.S. military spending would destroy our economy. How do you respond?

**Ellsberg:** E.P. Thompson [the British social critic and founder of European Nuclear Disarmament], has noted that it's misleading to describe the United States and the Soviet Union as *having* military-industrial complexes; they *are* military-industrial complexes. It's a defining characteristic that our economies—our research and development and the mainsprings of our industrial base—are centered on military spending. Our elites' short-run point of view has always been to sustain the addiction of our economy to military income, to keep that regular fix of military spending flowing through our veins.

Now, we're talking about finally changing that ideology. Gorbachev has been determined for several years to bring about arms reductions, and to a large extent he is willing to do so unilaterally. The economic exigencies in the Soviet Union, while even greater at their lower level of productivity and GNP, are quite parallel to what we have in this country; their economy, too, has been built around military production. Gorbachev realizes that this dependence on military spending has been hollowing out his economy. For him to achieve any of his modernization and democratization aims, the Soviet Union will require pronounced cuts in military production. Without that he would be pursuing voodoo *perestroika*.

The Soviets now refer to the Brezhnev period as the "era of stagnation." The irony is that the United States has been suffering from what we should be calling our own era of stagnation. Leonid Brezhnev presided over an enormous arms buildup, essentially imitating an earlier and concurrent arms buildup by the United States. Then, in the 1980s, Reagan eagerly imitated the wasteful Brezhnev buildup with enormous increases in our military forces, expenditures of trillions of dollars on so-called defense.

The result has been a denial of reality—denial of the real problems of stagnation of our industrial base and capability, of the crises in our cities, and above all, of the extremely severe environmental problems we're facing. What we need in the United States is the same kind of awakening from this era of



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sleepwalking that they're now experiencing in the Soviet Union. We need our own openness about where we've been and what we've been doing. We need our own *perestroika*.

**Q:** Isn't there a limit to how far Gorbachev can go with his own arms reductions without being matched at all by the United States?

**Ellsberg:** I doubt if he can go down nearly as far as he wants without some reciprocation, and the sooner we join him, the more likely it is that he'll be able to continue his policies domestically and internationally. Gorbachev understands that truly radical reductions in nuclear weapons, on the way to total abolition, are necessary not just to save money—as the American public tends to think—but to reduce a real, persistent risk of nuclear war. That radical reduction and restructuring of nuclear forces can only be achieved by a mutual process, not unilaterally by either side.

The real prospect for the radical transformation of the current nuclear impasse is an approach that combines pressure on the United States and NATO governments from the Soviets and from the public in this country and in Western Europe. That will require a revitalization of the U.S. antinuclear movement of the early 1980s, which won't be easy. Unfortunately for the peace movement, the Reagan Administration discovered that all it took to demobilize public protest was to engage in talks with the Soviets. There was no need to reach agreement, to make substantive reductions; the public would be quiet if only they were talking. It was the refusal to talk that was politically dangerous.

The notion that neither side wants a nuclear war is correct, but it shouldn't be nearly as reassuring as most people take it to be. Global nuclear war is not fated to happen, but it obviously *could* happen, and that possibility will remain with us for a considerable period—at least for the coming generation.

Fortunately, there exists a Soviet leadership that is willing to put pressure on the United States. Our objective must be to encourage Gorbachev to continue making a sequence of offers that Bush can't refuse, or more precisely, offers that our public and Congress and allied publics won't let him refuse.

**Q:** Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Victor Karpov—a favorite Gorbachev spokesman—has hailed Bush's recent proposals as leading to potentially the "most significant event in Europe since World War II." What would you define as a best-case scenario? How would you like to see the process unfold?

**Ellsberg:** In the nuclear field, a number of Soviet offers are already on the table. I would tell Bush, "Just Say Yes"—to a comprehensive test ban, to maintaining the ABM treaty indefinitely, to immediate negotiations on short-range nuclear forces in Europe, looking toward their elimination.

NATO, pressed by Bush and [British Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher, has just said "no" to the last one. But Gorbachev hasn't taken that for a final answer. As he said to the Council of Europe on July 6, the Soviets "regard the elimination of nuclear weapons as a stage-by-stage process."

I feel more optimistic than I would have even a few months ago. Despite Bush's commitment to the nuclear status quo, we should aim at the near-abolition of nuclear weapons by the end of the century, and the complete abolition of their use as a basis for threats. That means not a 50 per cent but a 98 per cent reduction in nuclear stockpiles, with the more than 20,000 tactical weapons ~~on each side~~ totally eliminated and strategic

weapons reduced by at least 95 per cent. It means a worldwide commitment to no-first-use enacted in posture as well as words; a ban on ballistic-missile flight testing as well as underground nuclear tests, and a genuine multilateral commitment against proliferation.

We can't expect leadership from Bush in this direction—even if he is pushed by the resurgent public movement I hope to see—but fortunately we have Gorbachev. I would like to see him initiate in the field of nuclear disarmament the three-pronged approach he has launched with conventional disarmament in Europe. He has begun by adopting a radically new strategic concept for conventional forces—what has been called "nonprovocative defense." He has made this the basis both for powerful new proposals for mutual disarmament and for dramatic *unilateral* moves to start bringing his own forces into line with the new concept.

Gorbachev is not only preaching a new idea, he is starting to practice it, actually reducing the Soviet capability—and thereby the threat—of launching sudden tank offensives across neighboring borders. I would like to see the Soviets rethink the aims and missions of their more than 20,000 nuclear weapons along the same lines. With a three-way combination of conceptual education, strong proposals, and unilateral moves, they could lead the way toward restricting the function of nuclear weapons on all sides to a single role: deterring nuclear attack.

**Q:** Most Americans think that has been the U.S. goal all along.

**Ellsberg:** Yes, many in the public may think that's been U.S. practice for a long time, but they couldn't be more wrong. It's time for Gorbachev—since Bush certainly won't do it—to acknowledge what has been true for more than a generation: Both sides have been buying and deploying weapons of types and in numbers that go beyond the single function of deterring nuclear attack and that pose a serious threat of initiating nuclear attack.

Neither side speaks openly any more of trying to "win" a general nuclear war, but this has scarcely affected their posture or programs, because the same kinds of first-strike weapons serve an equally delusional goal that has not, until now, been effectively abandoned by either side. That's the aim of "limiting damage" in a general war by a preemptive attack on the hardened or mobile nuclear missiles or command posts of the other side.

If they openly gave up that illusory ambition, the Soviets could *unilaterally* begin a steady process of dismantling and destroying their SS-18, which—like our MX and Trident II or D5—is designed for just this purpose. They could stop their flight testing of such weapons and call on the United States to join them. And they could call on the United States to move promptly with them toward the total mutual elimination of all such accurate, multi-warhead, silo-busting weapons. That would be an important substage on the way to 95 per cent reduction of strategic forces by the year 2000.

That pace of disarmament calls for a sense of urgency in the public that doesn't really exist at the moment. But there's a way for the Soviets to bring that, too, about. If they stopped feeling a need to rationalize their own possession of madly irrational and provocative forces, they would be free to do something that no nuclear state has yet done: tell the full truth about nuclear war.

I mean they could actually throw their safes open on this subject and invite other governments to do the same—to tell the awful truth about what the weapons they have developed and bought would do to people and cities and the environment around the world, if their existing plans were carried out.

In this area, the U.S. Government has always been thoroughly Stalinist in its secretiveness, in its lies and denial; it wouldn't be hard at all for Soviet *glasnost* to put the West to shame. And a competition in superpower candor about nuclear war would create the best possible climate to discourage proliferation and generate popular movements demanding that governments rid the Earth of nuclear weapons. ■